



Senator

48th District

Luke Esser

Senate Majority Floor Leader

Olympia office address:
211 Irv Newhouse Building

How to contact me in Olympia:
PO Box 40448
Olympia, WA 98504-0448
(360) 786-7694

How to contact me in district:
611 Market St. #5
Kirkland, WA 98033
(425) 739-1818
(Please call ahead if you wish to visit us here.)

E-mail: esser_lu@leg.wa.gov

Toll-free Legislative Hotline:
1-800-562-6000

TTY: 1-800-635-9993

Internet information:
www.leg.wa.gov

Access Washington Web site:
<http://access.wa.gov>

Senate committee assignments:

- Highways & Transportation
- Judiciary, Vice Chair
- Rules
- Technology & Communications, Vice Chair

Dear Neighbors,

The state Legislature recently completed our 60-day session in Olympia. My priority throughout the session was jobs — protecting existing jobs, creating new jobs and educating young people for the good-paying jobs of the future.

Although most of the nation has recovered from the economic recession, our state's recovery has been slower. Washington's unemployment rate still ranks among the highest in the nation. That's why it's so important for the Legislature to do more to put our unemployed neighbors back to work.

I'm proud of the work accomplished in the Senate to create an environment that will lead to more jobs: adopting a no-new-taxes budget, reducing mandates on small businesses, investing in transportation projects that will increase mobility, and promoting high-tech research and development at state universities and in the private sector.

This newsletter covers our progress in improving Washington's climate for jobs and economic growth. It also recaps our work on other important issues, including education in our public schools, health insurance reforms, domestic violence prevention, and property tax relief for seniors and people with disabilities.

I'm disappointed that the House did not support a significant performance audit proposal and many regulatory reforms that were passed by the Senate, but we did as much as we could in the time allotted.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you're encountering a problem with a state government agency or if you have questions or concerns about issues addressed by the Legislature. I look forward to helping you.

Sincerely,

Senator Luke Esser

Property tax relief for seniors, people with disabilities

The Legislature this year passed a measure that provides additional property tax relief for low-income seniors and people with disabilities. In order to account for inflation, Senate Bill 5034 increases the low-income threshold that qualifies seniors and persons with disabilities for property tax exemptions and deferrals. It also allows Medicare premiums to be deducted before calculating disposable income, so that more of our neighbors with large health care costs will be eligible for property tax relief.

Jobs

My highest priority has been making sure that every person in our society who is able to work can find a good-paying job. Good jobs create economic independence, strong families and optimism for the future.

I'm pleased to report that many of the actions we took in the Legislature this past session will ultimately create more jobs in our state: adopting a responsible no-new-taxes budget, promoting high-tech research and development, and investing in transportation projects that will increase mobility for freight and people alike.

However, there is much more work to be done to cut government waste and to reduce the excessive regulatory burdens that state agencies cause. Accomplishing these reforms will help to create even more jobs in our state.

Promoting high-tech research and development

I was delighted that the Legislature extended two high-tech tax incentives that were scheduled to expire later this year. Since these tax incentives were created 10 years ago, about 40,000 high-tech jobs have been created in Washington. With our state's economy still struggling, we needed to maintain our commitment to helping our high-tech businesses in fields such as computer software and the biomedical sci-

ences grow and create even more jobs.

This year's state budget also provides the University of Washington Medical School with \$1.6 million to fund the personnel and equipment needed to open a groundbreaking Proteomics Program. As scientists continue to unlock the secrets of the human gene structure, the study of proteins will become even more important. The Proteomics Program is likely to make our region a world leader in this field and spawn many great scientific advances.

2004 Budget: Fiscal responsibility with a heart

Last year, the Legislature met a \$2.6 billion budget shortfall without increasing taxes and without resorting to painful cuts to human services. This year, we had the same goals as we made adjustments to the state's two-year, \$23.2 billion budget. Here's the budget at a glance:

- Includes no new taxes
- Leaves almost \$300 million in reserve
- Slowest-growing budget in state history

We prioritized spending on the most important state needs. The new budget:

- Funds 3,000 new enrollments in colleges and universities
- Provides full funding for nursing home care for seniors and people with disabilities
- Doubles the funding for domestic violence shelters and services
- Increases salaries for the lowest-paid classified school employees
- Approves a new contract for home health-care workers
- Increases funding for in-home long-term care of seniors and people with disabilities

Supplemental transportation budget becomes law

The 2004 supplemental transportation budget approved by the Legislature protected all of the transportation projects authorized in last year's budget. We remained focused on adding the additional highway capacity that will improve our region's competitiveness and quality of life by reducing congestion. Some new freight mobility projects were added, which will make it easier for local companies to ship their goods overseas and create new jobs.

The Senate version of the transportation budget would have accelerated the construction of several critical projects on I-405 — the most glaring transportation need on the Eastside — and the design of the replacement for the Alaskan Way Viaduct. But, unfortunately, the House would not agree.



Sen. Esser and others were on hand to watch Gov. Locke recently sign into law a measure (SB 5536) that will help provide more affordable housing by addressing an aspect of tort reform dealing with condominium construction.

Performance audits and other strategies to reduce wasteful spending and make state government accountable

This session, the Senate passed several bills aimed at reducing wasteful government spending, and making state government more responsive and accountable. Sadly, only one minor bill made it through the House and onto Gov. Locke's desk. The bills that didn't survive include:

- **Performance audits.** The Senate version of House Bill 1053 would have authorized the state auditor to contract with qualified independent evaluators to conduct performance audits of state agencies. A performance audit would have been specifi-

cally required of the Department of Labor and Industries, which tried to implement job-killing ergonomics rules that were overturned by a vote of the people last year. The House refused to agree to the Senate version of the bill.

- **Governor's approval of significant regulations.** Given that our state has one of the highest regulatory burdens on business in the country, it is appropriate that the governor formally approve "significant" new state regulations (which are rules that adopt new penalties, involve licenses or permits, or create a new policy or regulatory program). Currently any agency head has the ability to impose new regulations on his or her own. Senate Bill

5257 would have made those agency heads justify their new regulations to the governor, whose signature would have been required for implementation. Again, the House would not agree.

- **Legislative supervision of significant regulations.** Senate Bill 5052 would have delayed the effect of significant legislative rules until after the following legislative session, so that the full Legislature would have an opportunity to review them. Small businesses, especially, face a significant burden from government regulation (frequently referred to as the "silent tax") and legislative oversight is needed now more than ever, but Senate Bill 5052 died in the House.

Key education measures approved

Recognizing that education is the paramount responsibility of state government, the Legislature passed measures this session to address the issues of school funding, school reform and school safety.

FUNDING—Helping schools collect voter-approved money. Technicalities and complications in state law have prevented local school districts from collecting the full amount of school levies authorized by the voters in previous elections. I think it is important to respect the will of the voters, so I supported changes in state law that allow the Bellevue, Lake Washington and Issaquah school districts to collect additional levy funds in the 2005 calendar year to be used in those local school districts.

REFORM—Allowing retakes on the WASL. Prior law required high school

students to pass the WASL test to graduate, yet gave those students only one chance to pass the test. One bad test score would have prevented students from ever graduating. A new law allows high school students to retake the test up to four times — and authorizes alternate means of satisfying graduation requirements for those students who can demonstrate their proficiency in basic skills through other means.

Refocusing the Learning Assistance Program. Senate Bill 5877 reforms and strengthens the state's Learning Assistance Program. The bill requires that schools utilize best practices, and focuses resources on those school districts that need the most help.

Authorizing creation of Charter Schools. In order to provide parents with more school choice, House Bill 2295 authorizes the development of charter schools within the public school system. The focus will be on

offering students at failing public schools the option of attending a charter school instead.

SAFETY—Protecting students from teachers and coaches who prey.

Following several media stories late last year about poor follow-through in the investigation of coaches who prey on young female athletes, the Legislature passed a bill (SB 6171) requiring the state superintendent of public instruction (OSPI) to conclude within one year investigations about certified school employees accused of misconduct. The current average is 15 months, although some cases have taken more than two years to investigate. The bill also requires OSPI to conclude investigations regardless of whether the school employee resigns, lets his/her teaching license expire, or moves out of state. Every parent has the right to expect that their children participating in school sports will return home safe and unharmed.

Legislature tries to make health care more affordable

Health care premiums have skyrocketed in recent years, making it harder for small businesses to provide coverage for their employees. I believe that one of the keys to driving down these spiraling cost increases is to reduce government mandates so that small business owners will have more choices and less expensive alternatives.

This year, the Legislature passed a measure to reduce the level of man-

dates on small businesses that provide health care insurance for their employees. Current law had such a high level of mandates that small business owners were left with the choice of providing a "Cadillac" plan to their employees that included everything up to and including acupuncture treatments—or no health care coverage at all. The Senate passed a version of the bill that was predicted to help

provide affordable health care coverage for thousands of workers who are going without health insurance today. The final version of House Bill 2460 that the House agreed to left many mandates still in place, including the requirement that acupuncture be covered in every health care policy provided by small businesses.

Doing more to prevent domestic violence

Unfortunately, domestic violence is still a serious problem in our state, despite greater public awareness, more laws and stiffer punishment. In 2002, law enforcement departments throughout the state responded to 50,121 domestic violence-related calls, down only slightly from the 50,995 calls that these departments responded to in 2001.

In March, the governor signed four domestic violence bills at the Tacoma YWCA to honor Crystal Brame, a domestic violence victim who was murdered by her husband. I was

proud that one of the four bills was a measure that I sponsored and spearheaded in the Senate. My bill (Senate Bill 6384) will provide more funding for domestic violence prevention and advocacy programs by allowing courts to impose a financial penalty of up to \$100 on anyone convicted of a crime involving domestic violence.

It's only fair for domestic violence offenders to help pay for the costs of the problem they create. And the money will be spent in the community where the penalty is assessed. Domestic violence is a bipartisan

issue, and I was proud to work closely with Rep. Dave Upthegrove (D-Des Moines), who led the charge for the new bill in the House.

I am also pleased to report that we managed to increase funding in our no-new-taxes budget for domestic violence programs. This year's budget included an additional \$2 million that offsets a \$1 million cut in federal funding for domestic violence programs and helps expand existing domestic violence advocacy programs.

2004 Legislative Review

Senator Luke Esser
PO Box 40448
Olympia, WA 98504-0448

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